



## WORLD &amp; NATION

# How to keep 'em down on the farm

By JONAH GOLDBERG

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FOR THE FIFTH SUMMER in six years, I'm driving across the country. Aside from the country's immense beauty, the decency of its people and the relative difficulty of finding a good cup of coffee near the interstate, one of the things you start to appreciate when you've seen a lot of the United States is how sparsely populated it is, particularly in the middle. It seems the welfare recipients need a lot of room.

I'm referring, of course, to American farmers. Or, more precisely, American farm owners, a.k.a. Welfare Kings.

There are few issues for which the political consensus is so distant from both common sense and expert opinion. Right-wing economists, left-wing environmentalists and almost anybody in-between who doesn't receive a check from the Department of Agriculture or depend on a political donation from said recipients understand that Americans are spending billions to prop up the last of the horse-and-buggy industries.

At this nation's founding, nearly nine out of 10 workers were employed in agriculture. By 1900 that fell to fewer than four in 10. Today, fewer than one in every 100 workers is in agriculture, and less than 1% of gross domestic product is attributable to agriculture. Yet this country spends billions upon billions of dollars subsidizing a system that makes almost everyone in the world worse off.

Our system is so complicated -- i.e. rigged -- that it's almost impossible to know how much agricultural subsidies cost U.S. taxpayers. But we know from the Washington Post's recent reporting that since 2000 the U.S. government paid out \$1.3 billion to

“farmers” who don’t farm. They were simply “compensated” for owning land previously used for farming. A Houston surgeon received nearly \$500,000 to alleviate his hardship. Cash payments have cost \$172 billion over the last decade, and \$25 billion in 2005 alone, nearly 50% more than what was paid to families receiving welfare.

But those sorts of numbers barely tell the story of our appallingly immoral agricultural corporatism. Subsidies combined with trade barriers (another term for subsidy) prop up the price of food for consumers at home and hurt farmers abroad. This is repugnant because agriculture is a keystone industry for developing nations and a luxury for developed ones. This keeps Third World nations impoverished, economically dependent and politically unstable. Our farm subsidies alone -- forget trade barriers -- cost developing countries \$24 billion every year, according to the National Center for Policy Analysis. Letting poor nations prosper would be worth a lot more than the equivalent amount in foreign aid. But Big Agriculture likes foreign aid because it allows for the dumping of wheat and other crops on the world market, which perpetuates the cycle of dependency.

Then, of course, there’s the environment. Subsidies wreak havoc on the ecosystem. One small example: There’s a 6,000-square-mile dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, larger than Connecticut. It’s so depleted of oxygen because of algae blooms caused by fertilizer runoff that shrimp and crabs at the Louisiana shore literally try to leap from the water to breathe. This is endangering the profitable Gulf fishing industry. Most of the fertilizer comes from a few Midwestern counties that receive billions in subsidies (more than \$30 billion from 1997 to 2002, according to the Environmental Working Group).

But, again, the full environmental costs are incalculable. If you’re hung up on global warming, consider that American farming is hugely energy intensive. Those energy costs are not fully borne by the producer, so in effect the taxpayer is paying for greenhouse emissions that do not benefit him. Moreover, across the U.S., swaths of forests and wetlands have been cleared or drained to make room for farmland that would never earn a buck were it not for the generosity of Uncle Sam. Who knows how

much cleaner the air and water would be with those resources intact? And who knows how many more dubious “wetlands” would be free for productive economic development?

There’s a lot of romance about the family farm in this country. But that’s what it is: romance. Most of the Welfare Kings are rich men -- buffalo farmer and CNN founder Ted Turner is one of the biggest. Of course, there are small farmers out there, but they have no more right to live off the government teat than the corner bakery I so loved as a child but that couldn’t keep up with the times. We don’t have a political system addicted to keeping bakers rich.

Meanwhile, our system -- chiefly the Senate, which gives rural states outsized power, and the Iowa presidential caucus, which forces politicians to whore themselves to agricultural welfare -- is rigged to prevent real free market reform.

I’m all in favor of farming when it’s economically feasible. And while many of these folks I meet on my adventures are the salt of the earth, I don’t see why they shouldn’t pull their own weight.

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